



HQ AETC News Clips

Randolph AFB TX



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Students at Air Base Feel Safe, Study Finds

Posted February 27, 2004

By ERIC SCHMITT
New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26 -- An Air Force review of a major training base in Texas where two dozen women reported they were assaulted two years ago has found that most military students there believe they are in a "safe working, living and training environment."

The conclusion, which was detailed on Thursday in a briefing to the two senators from Texas, came from a 22-member Air Force team that earlier this month interviewed 1,000 people at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Tex., including students, medical personnel and chaplains. It also surveyed more than 5,000 additional trainees about their confidence in the sexual-assault reporting process and victim assistance programs at the base.

Air Force officials said the survey had found that 90 percent of the trainees on the base believed the military leadership had handled sexual assault reports properly, and that 95 percent of the women surveyed said they felt safe there.

About 45,000 students go through training programs each year at Sheppard; 15 percent to 17 percent are women.

An Air Force spokesman did not dispute that 20 to 25 women reported to a rape-crisis center in Wichita Falls that they were assaulted in 2002.

"We don't challenge those numbers," said Col. Robert A. Potter, spokesman for the Air Education and Training Command, "and we are taking this very seriously."

The review found that trainees were reluctant to report such assaults, especially to military authorities, fearing that their training would be delayed by any investigation and that they would be disciplined for misconduct related to the assault, like under-age drinking off base.

"Though the review team's preliminary findings strongly suggest the environment at Sheppard A.F.B. is safe," a statement issued on Thursday by the air training command said, "student training should be expanded to include more emphasis on sexual assault awareness, deterrence and reporting."

On Thursday, the head of the command, Gen. Donald G. Cook, gave a detailed briefing on the preliminary findings to Senators Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn, both Republicans. A day earlier, Gen. T. Michael Moseley, the Air Force vice chief of staff, gave a brief summary of the inquiry's findings to senators at a hearing of the Armed Services personnel subcommittee.

The Texas senators reacted with tempered praise for the Air Force.

"I commend the Air Force for launching an immediate, serious inquiry at Sheppard," Ms. Hutchison said in a statement. "However, the findings released today are far from complete."

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Students at Air Base Feel Safe, Study Finds

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"It also appears," she said, "that some 10 percent of students - that's hundreds of respondents - apparently lack confidence in base leadership's handling of sexual assault allegations."

A spokesman for Mr. Cornyn, Don Stewart, said, "In the Sheppard experience, in a matter of weeks, the Air Force not only determined a problem, but sent a team there, produced preliminary results and had two senior generals brief us."

In his meeting with General Cook, Mr. Cornyn underscored the need for the Air Force to develop a more effective victims assistance center, modeled along the lines of a system the Navy has, Mr. Stewart said.

In addition to the interviews and survey, the head of the Air Force inquiry at Sheppard, Col. K. C. McClain, a woman who is the training command's deputy director of operations for technical training, met with the leaders of a local crisis counseling center and civilian law enforcement officials.

The Air Force statement said both groups expressed support for the base's ability to respond adequately to sexual assault cases, but officials at those groups could not be immediately reached for comment on Thursday.

The inquiry also reviewed the handling of 45 sexual assault cases at Sheppard from 1993 to 2003 that resulted in courts-martial or administrative punishment. The dispositions of 69 other cases since 1996 in which no disciplinary action was taken are under review, the Air Force said. Ten current accusations of misconduct are also under investigation.

New York Times

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Pentagon: Sexual Assaults Are on Decline

February 25, 2004, 6:53 PM EST

By ROBERT GEHRKE
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON -- Sexual assaults in the military have been cut in half in recent years, the Pentagon said Wednesday, responding to criticism from lawmakers who say the Defense Department is not doing enough to address the issue.

"No war comes without costs, but the costs should be borne out of conflict with the enemy, not by egregious violations by some of our own troops," said Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine.

David Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel, said new figures show the rate of sexual assaults against women in the military fell from 6 percent to 3 percent between 1995 and 2002.

"It's still too high, there's still a long way to go, but it's down substantially from where we were," Chu told a Senate Armed Services subcommittee.

He said the most progress needs to be made in providing care to victims.

Pentagon officials said there have been 106 reports of sexual assault of troops deployed in the Middle East -- including Iraq and Afghanistan -- over the past 14 months.

In the Army, there have been 86 reported cases. Investigations have concluded in about half and 14 court-martials have been filed. Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey Jr. said investigations are harder to conduct when done in the midst of a military operation.

One of those cases involved Barbara Wharton's daughter. She was stationed with the Stryker Brigade outside Iraq last November when she was knocked unconscious by an unknown attacker after getting off guard duty in the early morning hours.

Wharton's daughter awoke stripped, bound and gagged. Doctors determined she was raped, but Wharton told the committee in a statement that minimal effort was taken to find her daughter's attacker. Her daughter was moved out of her unit, her requests to meet with a psychologist rejected and she eventually attempted suicide.

Wharton said her daughter was returned to the U.S., but felt "abandoned" by her commanders.

"Just because I came back with all four limbs intact, they're treating me like I'm faking," the daughter said, according to Wharton. "I feel like my chain of command betrayed me. I gave four years to that unit and I feel like it kicked me in the teeth when I was down."

Christine Hansen, executive director of the Connecticut-based Miles Foundation, a support group for military victims of domestic and sexual violence, said 68 women, most of them officers, contacted her organization with stories of sexual assaults at the hands of fellow members of the military. At least 13 had also reported the assaults to military officials.

Associated Press

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Pentagon: Sexual Assaults Are on Decline

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Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has asked for a review of sexual assault policies and the victim support network throughout the department. He asked for a report by the beginning of May.

One change under review is having standard policies on sexual assaults in all the military branches and providing uniform services to victims, Chu said.

The inquiry was prompted by stories in The Denver Post that thousands of sex offenders in the military had escaped punishment and numerous women's claims of sexual assault and rape were dismissed or mishandled by commanders.

The allegations were similar to stories told by Air Force Academy cadets, which prompted a purge of the academy's commanders and sweeping changes. An Air Force investigation identified 142 reported cases of sexual assault in a 10-year period.

The Air Force also dispatched a task force to Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, to probe claims of between 20 and 25 sexual assaults in the 2002-03 federal budget year.

Of the 5,035 people surveyed and 1,000 interviewed, at least 90 percent were confident the processes in place, felt safe at the base and had confidence in base commanders, said the Air Force's vice chief of staff, Michael Moseley.

Gen. William Nyland, assistant Marine Corps commandant, told lawmakers that sexual assault violates "the deeply held values of the corps and the military as a whole and will not be tolerated."

The chairman of the Senate Armed Services said senators will be supportive of the Pentagon's reform efforts and watching them closely.

"This committee is prepared to back the United States military to achieve zero tolerance," said Sen. John Warner, R-Va. "We're here to support you and if you don't carry it out, we're going to take over."

Associated Press

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Sheppard AFB gets initial OK on assaults

Web Posted: 02/27/2004 12:00 AM CST

Sig Christenson
Express-News Military Writer

Sheppard AFB conditionally passed the opening round of an inspection Wednesday into accusations of off-base sexual assaults that have brought the installation under the Air Force's microscope.

The Air Education and Training Command at Randolph AFB, which began a probe after dozens of off-base rapes were reported, found Sheppard to be safe, and that "robust programs exist to deter sexual assaults."

But while the command's 22-member team generally praised the base for the way it handled such cases after a weeklong review that included interviews with more than 1,000 people there, it also said there was room for improvement.

"We have confidence in what we are being told, but I don't want to sugarcoat it," said Col. Bob Potter, AETC's spokesman. "But there are areas we can improve upon, and one of those areas is the propensity to report sexual assaults to base officials."

AETC's commander, Gen. Don Cook, ordered the probe after the Denver Post reported two dozen women at Sheppard claimed to have been sexually assaulted by fellow airmen during the past year.

The women were assaulted at weekend off-base parties at hotels in Wichita Falls.

The newspaper said most of the victims contacted First Step Inc. a Wichita Falls rape crisis center, because they feared retaliation by telling commanders at the base.

The team last week interviewed 1,000 Sheppard commanders, instructors and students at the training base, and surveyed another 5,000. It also met with staff at First Step, which reported the incidents.

As the investigation continued, the Air Force reported an airman found dead in his dorm Feb. 17 had suffered a gunshot wound to the head. Staff Sgt. Edmund Ehrling, 35, of Wichita Falls had been charged in the sexual assault of a 12-year-old girl at the time of his death.

A Sheppard spokesman, Maj. Manning Brown, and Wichita Falls authorities said the case is still under investigation.

The Tarrant County medical examiner's office in Fort Worth is doing an autopsy but referred questions to Wichita Falls officials.

Brown and Potter said there is no evidence linking Ehrling to the sexual assaults, which occurred during the past year and were reported by First Step and then published in the Post.

The probe of Sheppard, AETC's largest training base with 9,900 airmen — two-thirds of them students — found it was secure but needed to bolster sexual assault awareness training.

San Antonio Express-News

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Sheppard AFB gets initial OK on assaults

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Nine of 10 airmen surveyed said they believed the base's leaders effectively handle sexual assault allegations once they are reported. But the AETC team also found that students worried they'd be disciplined for misconduct, embarrassed or forced to delay their training if they reported a sexual assault.

After meeting with Cook in Washington, Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn, both R-Texas, said more needed to be done.

Cornyn said he was "encouraged" by the command's commitment to punishing offenders, but "reiterated the need for the Air Force to implement a victims' assistance center, which I believe will increase the amount of crimes that are actually reported without fear of retribution."

Hutchison said the findings were "far from complete" and "raise additional questions." She called on Air Force Secretary James Roche to survey all women who have been at the base during the past five years.

"I'm concerned that there are 10 reported cases of abuse currently under investigation, and many more that have produced inconclusive results," she said.



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Hutchison wants Sheppard inquiry widened

Posted Feb. 26, 2004, 9:22PM

BY MICHAEL HEDGES

Houston Chronicle Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Texas Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison asked the Air Force on Thursday to contact all women who served at a base in Wichita Falls in the past five years to determine whether they had been sexually assaulted.

Hutchison, R-Texas, responded to an interim report into allegations of widespread sexual abuse at Sheppard Air Base by commending the Air Force for launching a "serious inquiry." But, she said, "the findings released today are far from complete. In fact, they raise additional questions."

She said she would urge the secretary of the Air Force, James Roche, to contact all women who served at Sheppard over the past five years to determine whether they had been assaulted but failed to report the abuse for fear of retaliation.

"All women serving at Sheppard over the last five years should be encouraged to report any incidents to a newly established telephone hotline," Hutchison said. "I'm concerned that there are 10 reported cases of abuse currently under investigation, and many more that have produced inconclusive results."

Air Force Gen. Donald Cook met with Hutchison and Sen. John Cornyn in Washington Thursday to brief them on progress in dealing with the allegations at Sheppard.

From 1993 to 2003, 45 Air Force men at Sheppard faced court-martial or received nonjudicial punishment for sexual assaults, said base spokesman Maj. Manning Brown. Three of those courts-martial resulted in acquittal, he said, with the others resulting in punishment of the offender.

But an off-base counseling center in Wichita Falls has told Hutchison that staff members had documented a much higher rate of sexual abuse, with as many as 25 female Air Force members from Sheppard saying they had been sexually assaulted by Air Force men in a one-year period.

Cornyn, R-Texas, said after meeting with Cook Thursday, "I left the meeting encouraged by their commitment to punishing any and all offenders, and their strong willingness to ensure the availability of a neutral victim assistance center. No victim should fear retribution for reporting a crime, and no crime should go unpunished for this or any other reason."

Cook "reinforced the Air Force's commitment to completing this mission at Sheppard Air Force Base, as well as implementing educational programs so that everyone will fully understand both the rules and the consequences," Cornyn said.

The Air Force has sent a task force to Sheppard to investigate the claims of widespread abuse. That team issued a preliminary report Thursday that found 90 percent of trainees at the base feel sexual assault allegations are effectively handled, while 95 percent of female students said they felt safe on the base.

Houston Chronicle

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Hutchison wants Sheppard inquiry widened

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The report also cited "robust programs existing to deter sexual assaults and swiftly respond to victims" while punishing perpetrators.

Hutchison said the percentages of women who didn't feel safe, or felt allegations were improperly handled, were troubling. "It appears that some 10 percent of students, that is hundreds of respondents, apparently lack confidence in base leadership handling of sexual assault allegations," she said.

The report called for improvements. "Student training should be expanded to include more emphasis on sexual assault awareness," the report said.

The military's response to allegations of sexual assault at Sheppard and elsewhere has become a volatile issue in recent weeks.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has ordered a high-level investigation of the military's handling of sexual abuse after reports surfaced that 88 male soldiers had been accused of abusing female comrades in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan.

Also, Rumsfeld has ordered a comprehensive review of sexual assaults in the military, due in May. And the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. is still dealing with the fallout from reports that leaders there ignored more than 100 reported cases of sexual assaults from 1993 to 2002.

During a hearing on the issue Wednesday, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner, R-Va., promised, "This committee is prepared to back the U.S. military to achieve zero tolerance" of sexual abuse. "We're here to support you and if you don't carry it out, we're going to take over," Warner told a top Pentagon official in charge of personnel matters.

Pentagon Undersecretary David Chu conceded that sexual assault is a "widely under-reported crime" in the military but said that based on reported incidents the rate at which female soldiers were abused had dropped substantially over the past seven years.

Meanwhile, Sheppard officials said Thursday they had found no evidence linking the death of an Air Force staff sergeant and an ongoing investigation of sexual assault allegations at the base. Staff Sgt. Edmund Ehring died of a gunshot wound Feb. 17 at a base dormitory.

His attorney was quoted by the Associated Press saying Ehrings' death was apparently a suicide. But Sheppard spokesman Brown said Ehring, who had faced allegations of sexual assault in an off-base incident, was not a target of the on-base investigation into charges of sexual misconduct.

Houston Chronicle

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Instructor's death investigated as possible suicide

Posted on Thu, Feb. 26, 2004

Associated Press

WICHITA FALLS, Texas -- Sheppard Air Force Base officials have found no evidence tying the death of an avionics instructor last week to an investigation of reported rapes on the base, a spokesman said Thursday.

"There is no indication that it's related whatsoever," said Maj. Manning Brown, a Sheppard spokesman.

Staff Sgt. Edmund Ehrling, 35, who faced sexual assault charges, was found dead Feb. 17 in a base dormitory. Attorney Dorie Glickman, who represented Ehrling, has said she believes the death is being investigated as a suicide.

Brown said the cause of the death remains under investigation. However, he said Ehrling died from a gunshot wound. He said he did not know the location of the wound.

Asked when a ruling on the cause of death might be made, Brown said, "I've heard 30 days or more."

Ehrling had denied allegations that he assaulted a 12-year-old girl in his home off base.

He died a day after an investigative team arrived to examine how base commanders have responded to a series of reported rapes. Brown has declined to say whether Ehrling had been interviewed by members of the Air Force investigative panel.

Brig. Gen. Arthur Rooney Jr. issued a statement last week saying: "The loss of any airman is felt by every member at Team Sheppard. Our prayers and thoughts are with the family of Staff Sgt. Ehrling during this most trying time."

The child told investigators a man touched her sexually with his fingers and that it hurt. A medical exam showed acute and chronic sexual trauma. Ehrling had been released from the Wichita County Jail on \$25,000 bond late last month.

The Air Force dispatched a task force to Sheppard to investigate claims of between 20 and 25 sexual assaults in the 2002-03 federal budget year.

Of the 5,035 people surveyed and 1,000 interviewed, at least 90 percent were confident in the processes in the place, felt safe at the base and had confidence in base commanders, said the Air Force's vice chief of staff, Michael Mosely.

Star-Telegram

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AETC Bases News Clips

Sheppard AFB, TX



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Panel: Base safe but can improve

Posted Feb. 27, 2004

By Lee B. Weaver
Times Record News

WICHITA FALLS, Texas -- Sheppard Air Force Base got passing marks from an Air Force special review team looking into sexual assault deterrence and victim support programs at the base, according to a preliminary report released Thursday.

But there's room for improvement, Air Force officials said.

The findings followed a review by a 22-member investigative team last week, which interviewed more than 1,000 base personnel and canvassed another 5,000 Sheppard students.

The team was commissioned by Gen. Donald G. Cook, Commander of Air Education and Training Command, after allegations earlier this month in the Denver Post that widespread sexual assaults on female Sheppard personnel had gone "largely unnoticed."

In a statement, Gen. Cook said the Air Force's mission regarding its base personnel is "to give them a safe and secure working, living and training environment."

"But if, despite our best efforts, deterrence fails, our top priority is to provide swift and compassionate aid to the victims, thoroughly investigate the circumstances surrounding assaults, and prosecute perpetrators," Cook said.

The preliminary report described the environment at Sheppard as "safe," and called the existing prevention and investigative programs "robust."

But the team also saw opportunities to improve the climate and practices.

"... student training should be expanded to include more emphasis on sexual assault awareness, deterrence and reporting," the report said. "Likewise, the current training programs for commanders, first sergeants, Military Training Leaders and instructors should be expanded to include additional training on sexual assault awareness, deterrence and reporting."

The report included the following findings:

- 90 percent of students think officials effectively handle sexual assault allegations when reported.
- 95 percent of female students said they felt safe on base.
- The 45 sexual assault cases from 1993 to 2003 that resulted in completed courts-martial or Article 15s were "handled appropriately and expeditiously."
- An additional 69 cases were investigated since 1996 that did not result in courts-martial or Article 15s.
- There are 10 allegations currently under investigation at the base.

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AETC Bases News Clips

Sheppard AFB, TX



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Panel: Base safe but can improve

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The report said the primary reasons students gave for not reporting sexual assaults were:

- Concerns that their training would be delayed by an investigation;
- Disciplinary action for their own misconduct at the time of the sexual assault;
- Embarrassment, loss of confidentiality and peer pressure.

U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, commended the Air Force for taking "many reassuring steps." But, the senator had misgivings of her own.

"The findings released today are far from complete. In fact, they raise additional questions," Hutchison said in a statement.

"I'm concerned that there are 10 reported cases of abuse currently under investigation, and many more that have produced inconclusive results. It also appears that some 10 percent of students ... apparently lack confidence in base leadership's handling of sexual assault allegations ... And I'm concerned when survey results indicate that a number of women continue to believe the base is not a safe place."



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Taps is going digital

The future isn't sound

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Sig Christenson and Scott Huddleston
Express-News Staff Writer

For 35 years, the slow, melancholy notes have poured from George Menefee's bugle, sounding taps.

On green cemetery lawns, standing a respectful distance from mourners, Menefee has lulled old soldiers — airmen, actually — to a final rest.

Now, the 59-year-old Menefee is facing a different kind of rest — the possible loss of his job as Randolph AFB's honor guard bugler. And like many American workers, the source of his unemployment is new technology.

"I never thought a couple of AA batteries would knock me out of a job," he said.

The "digital" bugle, a cone-shaped, battery-powered device that slips into a horn and plays a recorded version of taps, has been in the offing for years. The Pentagon revealed in 2002 it was studying the bugles but insisted they wouldn't displace live musicians.

The idea, the Defense Department said, was to cope with the large number of military funerals held across the country each year.

While the military has fewer than 500 buglers, 1,800 veterans die each day. A "dignified" alternative to boomboxes, and not a desire to cut costs, drove the decision, they added.

About 2,000 digital bugles have been produced since a six-month testing period ended this past May, a Defense Department official said.

Some \$200,000 was spent to develop the bugle at a cost of \$500 each (plus a \$25 shipping and handling fee). The bugles are produced by S&D Consulting International Ltd. in New York.

Not everyone in San Antonio has gone to the digital bugle. Sgt. Rene Duclos, a member of Fort Sam Houston's honor guard, said the Army has not purchased the devices. But he said the post, with four active-duty trumpeters, must call on a civilian at times because of a shortage of musicians.

Randolph offers military honors across a 4,700-square-mile area east to Louisiana and south to the Texas coast. It switched to the digital bugle to improve service for veterans' families, said Master Sgt. Leon Roberts, a spokesman with the base's 12th Flying Training Wing.

Menefee's future as the wing's sole honor guard bugler isn't clear.

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Taps is going digital

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He said a Randolph official told him last week that his services would not be needed after Friday. That official could not be reached, and his office said base policy precluded him from commenting.

Roberts said he was unaware of the conversation, but insisted that Menefee had not been terminated.

Whatever the case, Roberts said Menefee still could be called to sound taps if families prefer a live musician to the digital bugle. But with 708 funerals here in 2003, the digital bugle will get a workout simply because there's no way Menefee, who earned \$18,000 last year, could appear at every service, he said.

Retired Army Sgt. Maj. Benito Guerrero, a Vietnam veteran who heads a group of former and active-duty airborne soldiers, bristles at the idea of a digital bugle. Still, he feels it's better than a silent graveside service.

"Without it, you just have two soldiers folding a flag," Guerrero said.

Guerrero thinks the digital bugle sounds like a live bugler. But Menefee said the recording, made at a 1999 Memorial Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, is "cheesy" and "cheap."

"Put a jukebox out there and dress him in a uniform," he said.

The trend toward canned music doesn't go down well with other veterans.

Bob Dukes, a retired Army first sergeant who sounds taps at funerals, said most live buglers switched years ago to a trumpet, which has three button-controlled valves to regulate musical tone.

But giving families a make-believe performance of taps at funerals is "a deception to the public," he said.

"It's like somebody going on stage and pretending to sing a song, and they're lip-synching," Dukes said. "I don't know if the public's going to accept this."

The tradition of taps goes back to the summer of 1862, when Brig. Gen. Daniel Butterfield whistled a new tune to his brigade bugler, Pvt. Oliver Wilcox Norton, to replace the "extinguish lights" call, which Butterfield considered too colorless, according to an Arlington National Cemetery history.

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AETC Bases News Clips

Altus AFB, OK



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Altus AFB west runway to reopen

By Gwen Brewer, special to the Times

Thursday marks the ceremonial reopening of the west (inside) runway at Altus AFB.

The inside runway was closed in February 2003 to accommodate repairs made necessary by years of constant use, said Operations Support Squadron assistant operations officer Maj. Jake Miller, 97th. Once open, aircraft will resume operations on three runways; the inside, outside and the assault strip.

Miller said with the inside runway closed for construction the traffic count for all runways at Altus was reduced by about 30 percent. Altus aircraft used airports such as Clinton-Sherman Industrial Airpark and Amarillo and Lubbock International Airports to accomplish training. That traffic will now return to Altus AFB.

The opening also means that instead of all the traffic going to the east runway and the assault landing zone, the inside runway will once again be the primary runway for instrument approaches Miller said. The outside runway will be used primarily for visual patterns. This separation of visual pattern and instrument approach traffic will streamline operations and create a more efficient pattern. Not only will this relieve congestion, it will enable more aircraft to fly in both the instrument and visual patterns while decreasing pattern lengths.

Additional information includes:

- Visual patterns are generally flown within three miles north, south, and east of the runway.
- C-17 traffic will remain approximately the same, C-5s will increase slightly, and KC-135 traffic will increase the most. The total amount of traffic will be about 30 percent higher than last year, a return to 2002 traffic.
- On departure, all aircraft will climb to 2,017 feet above ground level before they begin a turn to the west. Normally traffic will fly north or south on the runway heading until about five miles before turning.
- On the outside runway, C-5s must climb to 1,500 feet above ground level before turning east into the tower visual pattern. After midnight, C-5s requiring multiple takeoffs and landings are restricted to the inside runway.

The year-long repair project is expected to be complete on today, one month ahead of schedule, according to Tom Williams, 97th Civil Engineer Squadron chief staff civil engineer and pavement specialist.

Although the ceremonial flight will depart on Thursday, the runway will not be open to full operations immediately. Altus AFB first will transition to a modified runway use program.

"We'll increase the traffic by 25 percent per week, while focusing on operational risk management and flying safety," said 2nd Lt. Robert Litwin, 97th OSS operations officer.

The Altus Times
DATE: 25 Feb 04



AETC Bases News Clips

KEESLER AFB, MS



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Black navy officer was a pioneer

By PATRICK PETERSON
THE SUN HERALD

GULFPORT -- When Willie Smith Jr. went to war in 1967, black naval officers were a rare breed.

He was the only black officer aboard a U.S. Navy destroyer, the USS Cony, serving in Vietnam when racial tensions sometimes surfaced. He later helped recruit minorities into the Navy, and was among the first black officers to earn a law degree and join the Judge Advocate General's Corps.

When commissioned, he was one of 137 blacks among 65,000 Navy officers. On his first sea assignment, he was the only black officer among 14 officers, all of whom worked for a difficult captain.

"You just didn't find many black officers on ships," said Smith, who accepted his pioneering role naturally.

"I recognized the reality that I was a pioneer," he said. "I wasn't lonely. It was like family.

"You suffered together. You had good times together."

Smith's even-tempered intelligence served him well during 23 years in the Navy. He joined the Navy Reserve in 1960, when he needed money to continue his education after two years at Jackson State University in Jackson. He chose the Navy because it offered the only program that would let him finish college before entering military service.

After graduating with a degree in history and political science, he went on active duty and was soon accepted as one of 10 black candidates among 2,000 officer candidates.

In 1968, he volunteered for duty in Vietnam to escape duty under the difficult captain aboard the Cony.

"I was under the gun," he said. "Can you imagine trying to be invisible?"

In Vietnam, among 150 men in his company, three were black. The black power movement and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination heightened tensions that year between races in the ranks.

Smith oversaw the operations of 120 men and nine boats that carried supplies and men on a dangerous river near the DMZ. When one boat crew had a conflict with a black crew member, Smith took his place on the boat, diffusing the racial tension.

"You had drugs, race problems and Dear John letters," he said. "You really had problems when you got down to their last four months. Some of them got to be a little gun shy."

After serving in Vietnam, Smith became a Navy recruiter in Texas and helped bring minorities into the Navy. He is proud of his advisory role in the creation in 1972 of Navy ROTC programs at black colleges in Houston and Baton Rouge.

Biloxi Sun Herald

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AETC Bases News Clips

KEESLER AFB, MS



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Black navy officer was a pioneer

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"It's one of the reasons I enjoyed recruiting," he said. "It was hard recruiting at first. There's an apprehension among minorities in going to sea."

Smith was comfortable joining the Navy because he had worked on Gulfport's docks and was familiar with ships.

After Vietnam, he entered law school at Vanderbilt University and graduated in 1975. He retired from the Navy in 1987, serving his final three years at the Seabee base in Gulfport. Now 63, he's been in private practice since, though his legal work in real estate, bankruptcies and titles has slowed due to a bout with cancer.

His even-tempered personality, however, is intact.

"I like to work with people," he said. "Everybody's different, and you have to come up with a way to accommodate them."

"But you have to have nerve and confidence to say, 'I think you ought to look at this again.'"

Biloxi Sun Herald

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Military retirees can avoid Medicare Part B penalty

Letter to the Editor

From the 1940s to the 1990s military personnel were told that if they served for 20 or more years in the military, and retired, they would receive free medical care for themselves and their eligible dependents, at military treatment facilities, for as long as they or their eligible dependents lived. As a result many military retirees did not elect to enroll in Medicare Part B because they didn't think they would need it.

As you probably know the government reneged on this medical care contract. In 2001 Tricare for Life became law. However, in order to enroll in TFL, Medicare-eligible military retirees had to have Medicare Part B. As a result many military retirees are paying the Medicare Part B penalty because they enrolled late.

If you know a military retiree who is paying the penalty, or has not enrolled because of the penalty, then please bring this MOAA Legislative Update of Feb. 20 to their attention.

"One of MOAA's significant legislative victories last year was a provision in the Medicare reform bill that will relieve many Tricare For Life beneficiaries from onerous Part B late enrollment penalties. The statute waives late enrollment penalties (as of January 2004) for all Tricare beneficiaries who enrolled in Medicare between Jan. 1, 2001, and Dec. 31, 2004. It also provides a special enrollment period in 2004 for TFL-eligibles who have been holding off enrolling in Part B.

"Because that special enrollment period, by law, ends on Dec. 31, 2004, it is critical that this provision be implemented as soon as possible. Many potential beneficiaries of the legislation (including 12,000 who reside overseas) will be hard to find and inform, so every day counts...

"We expect further details soon, as Medicare finalizes procedures to implement this provision."

FLOYD SEARS
Biloxi

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Opinion: Influence kept fortunate sons out of Vietnam

BY BILL MINOR
JACKSON.

In his 1995 autobiography, Secretary of State Colin Powell said he was angry that many sons of the "powerful and well-placed" managed to "wangle" safe stateside slots in National Guard or Reserve units during the Vietnam War draft.

Powell had no idea then that he would be characterizing the Vietnam-era record of his future boss, President George W. Bush, in the Texas Air National Guard.

After his 1968 Yale graduation, with the draft breathing down his neck, Bush was jumped over 500 others on waiting lists and given a slot in a Houston-based unit of the Texas Air National Guard.

Bush's father was then the U.S. congressman from the Houston district. A former Texas lieutenant governor has said that at the behest of a Bush friend he spoke to the head of the Texas Air National Guard on the younger Bush's behalf.

Soon after he joined the Air Guard unit, Bush was handed a commission as a second lieutenant, something the historian of the Texas National Guard says was extremely rare, particularly for anyone without a previous commitment.

Now George W. Bush, as a self-proclaimed "war president" is being put on the hot seat by the media over the gaping holes found in how much duty time he actually spent in the Guard in 1972 and 1973.

Technically he had been transferred to an Alabama Guard unit but it's well-known that "W" worked for months in the 1972 Senate campaign of his Dad's friend, Winton "Red" Blount and failed to take the required Air Force flight physical exam in October 1972 to retain his flying status.

Bush's cavalier attitude toward his Air National Guard service at a time young Americans were dying in the jungles of Vietnam has been interesting news copy, especially because now he is ordering Americans to die on the sands of a nation that posed no threat to us.

However, what most concerns me is that political pull obviously landed him a coveted stateside Guard billet in the first place. That's because I vividly remember how some prominent people here in Mississippi used influence to put their sons in similar cozy stateside military slots to escape the draft and avoid Vietnam.

One instance especially comes to mind: that in which the son of a powerful Jackson newspaper publishing family was slipped into the state's last available Army Reserve slot in a JAG (judge advocate general) unit without any prior legal training. That young man graduated from Jackson's Murrah High School in the same 1964 class as my oldest son, who served in Vietnam in 1969-70.

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Influence kept fortunate sons out of Vietnam

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What happened in Mississippi resonated with me in 1988 when Dan Quayle was put on the GOP ticket with George H.W. Bush. It was disclosed that Quayle's very powerful Indiana newspaper publishing family used heavy influence to get him a safe National Guard slot during Vietnam.

I certainly don't mean to knock the National Guard as we know it today (one of my sons is in the Mississippi Air Guard) when units are being mobilized and sent to Iraq to relieve the 160,000 regular troops stretched thin by deployment far beyond what the Pentagon had initially promised.

But the National Guard back in the Vietnam era was something entirely different, regarded as "weekend warriors," a choice haven to keep from being drafted.

From my own perspective, I find it significant that my oldest son graduated from LSU in 1968, the same year George W. Bush finished Yale. Big difference: Bush had gotten college deferments from the draft. My son had been in the Army ROTC in his four years at LSU and in his senior year was commander of the 4,000-member cadet corps.

At his graduation, Paul was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army. Deciding whether to begin active duty in the Army or start law school caused a lot of agonizing in the Minor household.

Knowing the Army already had their hooks in Paul and with the Vietnam draft then in full swing, I advised that even if he enrolled in law school it would be just a matter of time before the Army yanked him out and put him on active duty.

My wife was totally against the war in Vietnam and she wouldn't have minded it one bit if our son had gone to Canada. She urged me to work my political contacts to keep Paul from having to go to Vietnam.

While I also had misgivings about this country fighting a war in which the issues were certainly not clear-cut as they were when I fought in World War II, my feelings came down on the side that if you were called by your country it was a matter of duty to serve.

But I left it up to Paul to decide for himself. He opted to postpone plans for law school and went on active duty, being sent to the Army intelligence school at Fort Holabird, Md. When his six-month training as an Army spook ended in 1969 it was almost certain he would wind up in Vietnam. Of course, that's what happened.

It was a painful year, as we learned very little about what Paul was doing in 'Nam, largely because of the secrecy that went with his being an intelligence officer. My wife was beside herself when reports of casualties came out of Vietnam.

Nightly, I would get on my knees to pray that Paul would return safely. Thank God, he did in late 1970 and with a Bronze Star. He won it for going beyond what his job called for, making helicopter gunship missions to destroy Viet Cong munitions his intelligence team had located.

Me, I'm with Colin Powell; I too believe it was an undemocratic disgrace that young men with connections avoided risking their lives during Vietnam while the poorer, less-privileged risked theirs.

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